

Despite Assurances that Implementation was on Schedule, VA late in Disbursing Benefits to Veterans

WASHINGTON - U.S. Rep Harry Mitchell today is once again calling on the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) to provide full accounting of the problems it is encountering due to a backlog of benefits for the Webb-Mitchell Post 9/11 GI Bill.

Mitchell is also calling on the VA to produce its plans to address the backlog in a letter to Department of Veterans Affairs Secretary Eric K. Shinseki. Mitchell wrote Shinseki on September 16 following initial word of the delays.

"The VA has had more than a year to prepare for implementation of this law, it should be ready," Mitchell said. "Any delay in getting our veterans the benefits they earned and deserved is of urgent concern. The education that our veterans have been promised must not be delayed, not by a single semester."

Today, Mitchell wrote a follow up letter to Shinseki, week after his first went unaddressed, and has not yet ruled out calling a congressional hearing on the matter.

"As you know, I consider this matter urgent," Mitchell wrote. "I requested a full accounting about the problems the VA is encountering and what the VA is doing to solve them, and I am still waiting for it. I sincerely hope that the delay in responding to me does not reflect the priority the Department attaches to this issue."

Mitchell has also been contacted by veterans in his district who say they are experiencing similar delays in receiving their GI Bill educational benefits.

The Webb-Mitchell Post 9/11 GI Bill, which was signed into law last year, was introduced by Mitchell in the House of Representatives and Sen. Jim Webb of Virginia in the Senate to provide veterans with enhanced education benefits beginning this fall.

The first benefits under the program began to be disbursed on August 1, 2009. Tuition and fee payments were to go directly to institutions of higher learning while allowances for books and living expenses were to go directly to students. About 277,000 students have applied for payments, but tuition payments have been made for only about 20,000 eligible beneficiaries, while about 13,000 have received living stipends. [Source: [New York Times](#), September 24, 2009]

An estimated 2.1 million members of the military who have served on active duty since September 11, 2001, including activated reservists and members of the National Guard, are eligible for up to four years of education benefits, including stipends for housing and books.

Below is the text of Congressman Mitchell's letters to Secretary Shinseki:

Letter dated: September 16, 2009

Dear Secretary Shinseki,

With the academic year underway, I am troubled to read in Army Times that thousands of veterans are receiving late payments for their GI Bill benefits from the VA. Specifically, "About 260,000 students have applied for payments, but tuition payments have been made for only about 12,000 eligible beneficiaries, while about 8,000 have received living stipends." [See: http://www.armytimes.com/news/2009/09/military_gibill_delays_091509w/]

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The late payments have caused veterans to unfairly fall behind in their bills and start the academic year with added and unnecessary stress. As a former teacher, I know the importance of education, including the negative impact outside stress can have on a student in the classroom.

On August 1, 2009, veterans began receiving college education benefits under the new Post-9/11 G.I. Bill. As you know, this bill was signed into law last year, after Senator Jim Webb introduced the bill in the Senate and I introduced it in the House of Representatives. Under the bill, an estimated 2.1 million members of the military who have served on active duty since September 11, 2001, including activated reservists and members of the National Guard, are eligible to receive up to four years of education benefits, including stipends for housing and books.

The House Committee on Veterans' Affairs, of which I am a member, has conducted multiple hearings and meetings to oversee implementation of the new GI Bill. The VA assured members that implementation was on-schedule. Keith Wilson, Director of Education Service, Veterans Benefits Administration presented a detailed timeline and testified that the VA had assigned project oversight duties, established milestones and instituted frequent oversight and review, all to ensure that the August 1, 2009 effective date would be met.

The VA has had more than a year to prepare for implementation of this law, and it should be ready. To the extent that it is not, the VA has a responsibility to keep Congress informed, so that we may provide any additional resources that may be necessary.

I would like a full accounting, as soon as possible, about the problems the VA is encountering, and what the VA is doing to solve them, as well as any potential problems the VA believes it may encounter.

I consider this urgent. The education that our veterans have been promised must not be delayed, not by a single semester.

Thank you for your prompt assistance.

Letter dated: September 24, 2009

Dear Secretary Shinseki,

I write to follow-up on my last letter in which I conveyed my serious concern about thousands of veterans receiving late payments for their GI Bill benefits from the VA.

As you know, I consider this matter urgent.

In the letter, I referenced an article in *Army Times* that indicated "about 260,000 students have applied for payments, but tuition payments have been made for only about 12,000 eligible beneficiaries, while 8,000 have received living stipends"

[See: http://www.armytimes.com/news/2009/09/military_gibill_delays-091509w/]

These late payments have caused veterans to unfairly fall behind in their bills and start the academic year with added stress. This is simply unacceptable. Veteran's benefits are earned benefits and the VA has a solemn obligation to provide these benefits on time.

I requested a full accounting about the problems the VA is encountering and what the VA is doing to solve them, and I am still waiting for it.

I sincerely hope that the delay in responding to me does not reflect the priority the Department attaches to this issue.

Sincerely,

Harry E. Mitchell

Member of Congress